

Better to give than receive: making people with disabilities the providers, not recipients of volunteer services.

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Article:

Advocacy efforts by and for people with disabilities have traditionally focused on gaining opportunities for inclusive community recreation. While benefits of inclusive recreation experiences for people with and without disabilities have been documented and discussed extensively (e.g., Schleien, Ray, & Green, 1997), one leisure activity that has received little attention is volunteerism. People with disabilities are typically viewed as the recipients of volunteer services rather than potential contributors of services. The concept of inclusive volunteering represents a paradigm shift, one in which we begin to look at people with disabilities in a new role as givers and contributors to the community.

The terms "volunteerism" and "service learning" are often used interchangeably. It's important, however, to distinguish between community service provided of one's own free will (volunteerism) and community service that's integrated with one's educational requirements (service learning). Therefore, this article is limited to a discussion of volunteerism only.

Benefits of Volunteerism

In 1998, approximately 56 percent of adults aged 18 years and older volunteered a total of 19.9 billion hours (Independent Sector, 1999). Nolin, Chancy and Chapman (1997) estimated that 49 percent of students in grades 6-12 participated in volunteer service. These individuals bring much-needed skills, energy and person power to agencies. In 1998 alone, volunteers provided services equivalent to more than 9 million full-time employees at a value of \$225 billion (Independent Sector, 1999).

Volunteer literature is replete with claims of benefits associated with volunteering (e.g., increased self-esteem, sense of accomplishment, increased problem-solving skills); however, some researchers have questioned the merit of such claims (e.g., Yates, 1995). In an attempt to summarize existing volunteer literature, Yates (1995) reviewed 44 empirical studies addressing volunteerism that had been conducted between 1952 and 1994. After examining these studies, Yates concluded that youth volunteerism helps to build social connections with others, a perception that one can influence outcomes and moral-political awareness.

Volunteerism seems to increase social and personal responsibility. A study by Hamilton and Fenzel (1998) consisted of 44 adolescents (aged 17 years or less) who participated in 12 different youth volunteer projects. The data indicated that participants demonstrated modest gains in social responsibility, learned about themselves and how to work with others, and learned about carrying out responsibilities.

Research indicates that volunteerism is associated with a reduction in teen pregnancy and positive school-related outcomes. Moore and Allen (1996) reviewed findings of eight well-researched volunteer service programs for adolescents. Results from two programs persuasively indicated that volunteering is associated with "... a reduction in teen pregnancy, course failure, suspension from school, school dropout and an improvement in reading grades and self-concept" (Moore & Allen, 1996, p. 242). Other impacts of volunteerism identified in the eight programs studied were reduced alienation, more positive attitudes toward adults, self-acceptance, moral development, and social and personal responsibility. The results, however, didn't consistently support the idea that volunteerism helps with social competence, career exploration, problem-solving abilities, political

involvement or a belief in the individual's responsibility to help those in need. The authors concluded that programs that had the greatest impact lasted 12 weeks or longer, provided a variety of and choice in service opportunities, and fulfilled the needs and motives of the volunteers.

Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer and Snyder (1998) examined the impacts of volunteerism on students in grades 10 through 12. Results of the four-year study were similar to those reported by Moore and Allen (1996) and also indicated that volunteerism significantly increased intrinsic work values and increased perceived importance of community involvement. In contrast to results of some other studies, however, this study demonstrated no significant effects of volunteerism on senior-year educational plans, academic self-esteem and positive self-esteem.

Not only agencies and individual volunteers benefit from volunteering; the community benefits as well. Communities nationwide are struggling with the issue of building community capacity, defined as the ability to effectively develop, mobilize and use resources to manage change, address community problems and strengthen community assets (Mayer, 1996; Poole, 1997). Finn and Checkoway (1998) examined six community initiatives in the U.S. in which youths were active participants in identifying and solving problems, planning programs and providing services to their communities. The authors concluded that participating in such programs strengthened the youths' social development, leadership skills, and political and cultural understanding. The communities also benefited. They began to see youth not as "threats to be feared, problems to be solved or victims to be treated" (p. 343), but as competent community builders with valuable skills, insights and solutions. Although youth without disabilities are more frequently being seen as valuable contributors of services to their communities, youth with disabilities are still typically viewed as recipients of services. And while methods to build community capacity to support people with disabilities are often discussed (Benz, Lindstrom, & Halpern, 1995), ways in which people with disabilities can enhance community capacity through their own contributions are seldom, if ever, noted. "Communities are built through structures that mobilize the gifts and capacities of local citizens" (McKnight, 1997, p. 120). People with disabilities have a wealth of abilities, talents and knowledge to contribute. Including people with disabilities into existing volunteer programs could help to increase community capacity.

Roker, Player and Coleman (1998) examined benefits of volunteering specifically for youth with disabilities. Their national survey reviewed the volunteer and campaigning experiences of young people with disabilities in the United Kingdom. The youths interviewed represented a broad spectrum of ability levels and were involved in a wide variety of volunteer activities. These young adults indicated that they experienced increases in self-confidence, a sense of accomplishment or the ability to act upon and influence the world, personal and social skill development, development of social networks, and practical and work skill development.

Facilitating Inclusive Volunteerism

In 1999, we conducted a survey to evaluate the need for a program to facilitate inclusive volunteering opportunities. With the support of the Greensboro (N.C.) Volunteer Center, telephone interviews were conducted with agencies throughout the city who used volunteers. The telephone interview gathered information about the numbers and demographics of volunteers used and the types of tasks they accomplished. We also asked about the number of volunteers with disabilities, what accommodations had been made to facilitate their volunteering and the anticipated needs of volunteer coordinators to include volunteers with disabilities in the future.

The 111 agencies that participated in the interview used an estimated 17,900 volunteers each year. Only 426 (2.9 percent) of all volunteers had an identified disability. According to 1990 census data, there are approximately 235,596 individuals between the ages of 16-64 years who have disabilities in Guilford county, representing 68 percent of the population. The disparity between the number of people with disabilities in the county and the number of individuals with disabilities volunteering illustrated the untapped potential of volunteers within the Greensboro community.

Though few persons with disabilities were currently volunteering in agencies throughout Greensboro, those who did volunteer were able to complete tasks similar to those of non-disabled volunteers 61.5 percent of the time without any or minimal accommodations. These results are similar to those of a recent study in Ontario, Canada (Graft & Vedell, 2000).

Building a Program

The Building Community Through Inclusive Volunteering (BCTIV) initiative was subsequently designed to bring people with and without disabilities together to volunteer cooperatively in the community. BCTIV took a dual approach to facilitating inclusive volunteering within agencies. People with and without disabilities were actively recruited. Screening was conducted to identify volunteers' strengths, abilities, interests and needed supports. Individuals were then paired and provided companionship training (by BCTIV staff) to facilitate cooperative effort while volunteering at their selected agency.

Concurrently, community agencies were recruited and prepared to facilitate inclusive volunteering for the pairs. Agency preparation included a physical accessibility survey, analysis of volunteer job descriptions to identify necessary physical, cognitive and social skills, in-service training for staff and preparation for the volunteers. Early in each pair's volunteer experience, BCTIV staff provided onsite technical support via an inclusion facilitator who was present when the pairs were volunteering. As the volunteers and agency staff became more comfortable and any problematic issues were resolved, the inclusion facilitator withdrew from the setting. The goal of the BCTIV program is for the community to become capable and comfortable with including persons with disabilities into their existing volunteer programs.

Evaluation results indicated that BCTIV the program was well received by the agencies, participants and families involved. In the program's initial year, 287 hours of volunteer service were provided to agencies. During interviews and focus group meetings, staff members of agencies who participated in the program said they were pleased with the performance of the volunteers. Additionally, they noted benefits such as increased capacity, improved volunteer policies and procedures, more positive attitudes toward volunteers with disabilities and increased knowledge on utilizing volunteers with disabilities. Perhaps the most significant indication of the program's success is that agencies have invited the volunteers to continue volunteering. Participants with and without disabilities also enjoyed the experience and noted a variety of benefits. Participants with disabilities looked forward to their weekly volunteer opportunities, learned new skills and enjoyed the social interaction with peers. The program provided participants with disabilities opportunities to focus on their capabilities instead of their disability. As one participant stated, "I can show people what I can do." Participants without disabilities discussed positive changes in attitudes toward people with disabilities, increased confidence and willingness to interact socially with individuals with disabilities, willingness to advocate for people with disabilities and adopting a more inclusive philosophy.

For example, one non-disabled participant stated, "I learned to look at their abilities versus their disabilities. In the past, I'd look at someone and say, 'Oh, they can't do that, because they're in a wheelchair, or because Jay can't express himself.' But I've definitely been opened to that now." Parents and teachers alike have validated the positive impacts of inclusive volunteering and noted increases in effect, social interaction and willingness to work cooperatively with others. Another important outcome noted by parents and teachers was a sense of making a positive contribution to their community. One parent stated, "It gives Mike an opportunity to give back to a community that has given so much to him."

In summary, research indicates that volunteerism accrues benefits to those who volunteer, to agencies served by volunteers and to the community as a whole. Recreation and leisure professionals have emphasized providing inclusive opportunities to people with disabilities within programs and services. Inclusive volunteering necessitates a paradigm shift from viewing people with disabilities as recipients of services to contributors of service. This type of paradigm shift will ultimately result in benefits to persons with and without disabilities, agencies and communities as a whole. The key is to focus and build on the strengths and interests that volunteers with disabilities bring to the agency using a systemic and holistic approach to inclusion. This

approach, coupled with flexibility and creativity; will empower individuals to reap the benefits associated with volunteering while strengthening agencies and enriching communities.

RESEARCH INTO ACTION: FACILITATING INCLUSIVE VOLUNTEERISM

Research indicates that volunteers, agencies served by volunteers and communities benefit from volunteerism. Here are some recommendations for how to make inclusive volunteerism a reality.

- * Form partnerships with organizations such as the local Directors of Volunteers in Agencies or community volunteer center and those who provide information and advocacy related to disability. Assess interest in, and build support for, the concept of inclusive volunteerism.
- * Actively recruit people with disabilities to serve as volunteers. Although most agencies don't purposefully exclude people with disabilities from volunteering, few agencies actively recruit them. A recent study indicated that 90 percent of people volunteered when asked, as opposed to only 22 percent who volunteered without being asked (Independent Sector, 1999).
- * Conduct activity analyses of volunteer tasks to identify essential physical, cognitive, social and emotional requirements of the task. Conduct an accessibility inventory of the facility in which volunteer tasks take place. Think about environmental and task-related accommodations and modifications only where necessary and only to the degree necessary for individual volunteers. An agency's CTRS employee or CTRS consultant should be able to oversee these tasks.
- * Identify the interests and strengths of potential volunteers and match identified strengths and interests to agency and task. While a person's disability may be a factor in accomplishing certain tasks, volunteer coordinators would be more successful assigning tasks on the basis of an individual's abilities and interests.
- * Prepare volunteers with disabilities, agencies, environments and volunteers without disabilities. It's important to actively recruit and accommodate persons with disabilities into existing volunteer programs using a systematic, holistic approach. Instead of focusing efforts only on preparing the agencies or only on preparing the volunteers, prepare agency staff, volunteers with and without disabilities, recipients of service, family members, physical environments and the community at large.

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